

Middleborough Antiquarian

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VOLUME XXXI

SUMMER 1993

NUMBER 1



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A message from the Middleborough Historical Association

At present we are still struggling along without an Editor. Over the years, the Middleborough Antiquarian has been a valuable source of information for many people, and we are valiantly trying to keep it alive. We are fighting an additional battle because of the present state of the economy. Our members and subscribers are urging us to continue the fight for survival, but we cannot do it alone! We must have help!

We need an Editor, or a group of people who are willing to work together to continue publication of the Antiquarian.

We appreciate the patience and understanding of all our members and subscribers. We wish to thank Mr. Bob Barboza of the Middleborough Gazette staff for his help in preparing the Fall 1992, and this issue, for publication.

Sincerely,

Robert M. Beals, President

MIDDLEBOROUGH ANTIQUARIAN

Middleboro, Mass.

VOLUME XXXI SUMMER 1993 NUMBER 1

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His aunt was Mrs. Tom Thumb

(Portions of this article appeared in the Worcester Telegram, July 21, 1963, and was written by Danielle Day about her interview with the late Benjamin Bump.)

"Can you imagine having a school teacher no bigger than a three-year-old girl?"

Asking the question was Benjamin J. Bump, administrative assistant to the superintendent of schools in Milton. He smiled when he noticed the incredulity that his question provoked.

"Well, my aunt, Mercy Bump, was only that big. She taught grammar school in Middleboro. Then Phineas T. Barnum, the great showman, came along, and she started on a different career. She became Mrs. Tom Thumb, and that's how most people remember her."

Bump stands a good 5 feet 10½ inches tall, and when he mentioned that his Aunt Mercy when fully grown was only 32 inches tall, we couldn't help thinking that if she had been with us, the top of her head would have been just about level with her nephew's belt.

"She was born in 1841. Some people check the arithmetic — I'm 48 years old — and insist that my whole story is a fraud. They say that it wasn't possible for her to be my aunt."

He chuckled. "But my father was 78 when I was born — that's the explanation. He was Benjamin W. Bump, Jr. and his is another story. He served in the Civil War — he was wounded three times but kept going back — and I believe that I am the youngest son in the U.S. of a Northern Civil War Veteran. He died when he was 79, by the way. But now let me tell you about my aunt, Mrs. Tom Thumb."

Mercy Bump was born October 31, 1841, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Benjamin W. Bump, in the Warrentown section of Middleboro. She was a normal-sized baby, but when a still very young child, stopped growing."

Her shortness bothered her, especially since her four brothers were all at least six-footers and two of her sisters were full-sized women. However, her younger sister, Hulda, was slightly smaller than herself."

"I've been told that Aunts Mercy and Hulda had a deficiency of the pituitary gland, and that was the reason for their tiny size," Bump explained.

To give her height, Mercy always wore huge combs that were the fashion of the day. She had a natural reserve which commanded the respect of people, and she was dainty and meticulous. She never considered herself well-dressed unless she wore a lace vestee.

"My aunt always resented being called a midget. The term, to her, meant something misshapen and deformed. She definitely was neither. She was short, that's all. She always referred to herself as a little woman."

When a teen-ager, Mercy Bump made up her mind to do all the things a normal girl of that era did — teaching school, sewing, knitting and cooking. She received good training from her mother in domestic arts.



Benjamin Bump, Mrs. Tom Thumb's nephew, around three years old, models a suit worn by General Tom Thumb when visiting Britain's royal court around 1870.

She became a teacher and though only 17 years old, Mercy Bump maintained excellent discipline in her schoolroom. Nor did the fact that she stood upon a table to teach her third-graders, belittle her in their eyes. She had remarkable control over them.

Her pupils loved her so much that saw to it that she got to school every day. When it was muddy, the bigger boys made a seat of clasped arms and carried her over the puddles. If the snow was deep, they pulled her to school on their sleds.

The summer that Mercy was 17, life changed for her. She and Hula spent their vacations working on a cousin's Mississippi River showboat.

Phineas T. Barnum heard about Middleboro's miniature schoolmarm. He came to her home and talked her parents into allowing her and Hulda to join his troupe of midgets at his American Museum in New York City.

First, however, he changed their names. "No one," he said, "would ever come to see a person with the name of Mercy or Hilda Bump." Through questioning, he learned that the girls' mother's maiden name had been Warren. So Barnum dubbed Mercy and Hulda — Lavinia and Minnie Warren.

"At the museum, my two aunts and two other little people, including Commodore Nutt, gave recitations, sang and danced, all four of them taught by P.T. Barnum."

A romance blossomed, and shortly little Lavinia became the bride of General Tom Thumb, born Charles Sherwood Stratton in Bridgeport, Conn. He received his show-business name from Barnum too.

The wedding took place at Grace Episcopal Church, New York City, on Feb. 10, 1863. The bridal party, with Minnie Warren as bridesmaid and Commodore Nutt as best man, stood on a three-foot-high platform so they could be seen by the guests. Over 2,000 pieces of wedding cake were distributed, and accounts of the ceremony crowded news of the Civil War off the front pages. On their honeymoon, the Tom Thumbs visited President and Mrs. Lincoln at the White House.

Before Long the general and his lady retired from show business. But soon boredom set in. They returned to the stage and once again the four midgets were reunited when Minnie Warren and the Commodore joined them.

They toured Europe for three years and were the guests of royalty in many countries there. Pope Pius IX gave them an audience. In 1872, they made a tour of the world, in addition to return visits to some of the major cities of Europe. The Tom Thumbs were popular and they called on every President from Lincoln through Grover Cleveland.

Lavinia and Tom Thumb always took a tiny Morris chair and a rocker with them so that they could sit in comfort while visiting fullgrown people. They also carried a knock-down teakwood table and dining chairs with them on their travels.

Tom Thumb had a home built on a miniature scale in his home town, Bridgeport. But Lavinia felt a close kinship for her family. Realizing this, the general had a house built across the street from her parents' home in Middleboro. In this big, high-ceilinged, Victorian house, which still stands, the risers of the stairs are the only sign that midgets ever lived there. The risers are only about half the ordinary height.

The Tom Thumbs were hospitable and entertained frequently. To accommodate their normal-sized guests, they furnished their home with standard kitchen and bathroom fixtures in addition to specially made smaller ones for Lavinia and the General.

"My aunt often cooked a meal on her tiny stove, and she enjoyed nothing better than running her doll-like sewing machine. This had been one of her wedding presents," Bump said.

Paradoxically, the Tom Thumbs used regular dishes because they had normal appetites.

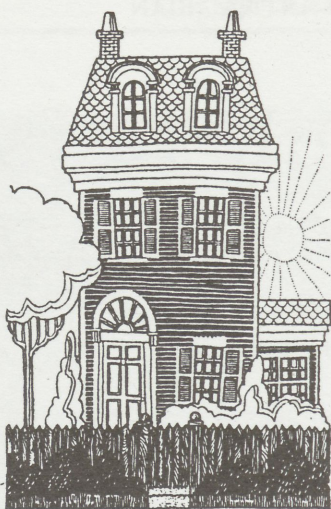


Benjamin Bump of Milton displays some of the tiny possessions of his aunt, Mrs. Tom Thumb, collected over the years and eventually distributed to several museums, in a 1963 photo.

They were said to own one of the largest collections of jewels in this country. These were kept in a 1,000-pound safe whose door, when unlocked, had to be swung open by another person as neither Lavinia nor the general were able to move it.

(Part 2 will appear in the next issue of the Antiquarian.)

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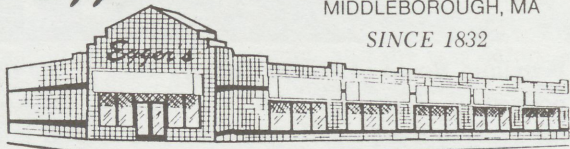


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Colonial Middleboro - Part II

by Warren and Marion Whipple

(Second in a series of three articles on Middleboro during the colonial period.)

II. The Formation of an Agricultural Village (c. 1686 - c. 1730)

All of the political changes (see Section I) had occurred in the first fourteen years of our history. Soon thereafter, completing the interval of a generation (20 years), big alterations began to take place in our town as Middleberry grew into a cohesive agricultural village. The town now had a population of about two hundred people, and was required to support a Town Clerk who would record marriages, births, deaths, and run elections. William Hoskins, who had served before King Philip's War, continued in office for the next twenty-four years, and his statistics tell an interesting story. By the way, he was paid with a load of fish! We also rely on family traditions and our own imagination to picture for ourselves these formative

years. The people were too busy to write an account of their everyday living experiences, and most of them were nearly illiterate. Usually, they could sign their name on a deed, and read familiar passages from the Bible, and that was all.

We know that one of their first acts was to rebuild the grist mill below the fort on the Nemasket River to save the two-day trip to Plymouth every time they needed to grind flour. Middleberry was blessed with many brooks that could be dammed for water power. Soon, there were sawmills and forges in many parts of town.

It was long trek to the weekly church services in Plymouth because most families had only one horse, and had to take turns riding and walking. There was no road, only a narrow foot-

Please continue on Page 9

Middleborough Historical Museum



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Benson's Harness Shop

George Benson operated a harness shop in Middleboro for more than fifty years. His last shop, on Wareham Street, was opened on March 17, 1909, and by the end of the following year, Mr. Benson's was the only harness shop still in business. The harness business on Wareham Street had been previously owned by Fayette C. Norris.

The little shop with its Cape Cod doorway and many paned-windows remained much the same in over one hundred years that it was occupied. The interior, smelling of leather, saddle soap and leather dyes, was lighted by kerosene lamps and heated by a pot-bellied stove. On the walls were posters and prints of many years of advertising buggies, carriages and horse medicines. Several benches were loaded with harnesses, bridles, horse blankets, while the rest of the interior was well-filled with the machinery necessary for the making of harnesses, and to an outsider might seem cluttered.

Not so to Mr. Benson, who could immediately put his hand on anything asked for. He was the only harness maker in this part of Massachusetts for several years, and during a weekday outside his shop there would be parked many kinds of vehicles from a chauffeured limousine to a farm wagon drawn by horses. He had customers from the farthest point on the Cape ranging from wealthy summer residents to farmers. The late actor James Cagney, who had a home on Martha's Vineyard, came to his shop one day to purchase a buggy harness.

Several years before the Wareham Street location, Mr. Benson had his shop on Everett Street where Count Magri, who married Mrs. Tom Thumb, was among his customers. Also, Otis Briggs of Middleboro, who ran a livery stable; and Charles Thomas and Andrew Miller, owners of the famous racehorse, Mandelina.

Besides making harness, Mr. Benson also sold saddles and horse blankets. During the World War II years, business was very good, since many people had dug out buggies and pony carts to use again, the gas and tire situation being what it was. Commenting on this, Mr. Benson said that little did he believe that he would see the day when the horse and buggy would be fashionable again.

On cool Autumn days, old-timers would gather around the cheerful stove in the shop, and swap tales of yesterday, and persons long since deceased would live again in their tales.

When the little shop where Mr. Benson plied his trade gave way to progress and was moved in 1954 to make room for Cannon Buick, Mr. Benson retired. His wife, Elizabeth, was a very popular English teacher at Bates Junior High School for many years.

(Above). George Benson at work in his shop. Note pot-bellied stove behind him. (Right). The Harness Shop as it appeared as late as 1943.



The Formation of . . .

path. Since 1675 each town had been required to have a "house of worship," but the settlers of Middleberry were too busy rebuilding homes to attend to everything at once, and so they had remained in the Plymouth parish. In 1678 a small group "called" Mr. Samuel Fuller to preach in private homes. He was not ordained, but was recognized as a capable man, son of the Pilgrims' doctor. He did agree to preach, but would not move to Middleberry until a permanent settlement was assured. Two years later the town purchased a house lot and twelve acres of land for him, and he did move here. A small church was built on Plymouth Street about a mile northeast of the present Church at the Green. It was reportedly a very plain building with backless benches to sit on, serving about twenty-two people. The congregation probably grew fast as the families were usually very large, and some people transferred their membership from Plymouth. Rev. Fuller's salary is listed as £20 (\$60), to be paid 1/4 in silver and 3/4 in produce. (Corn was valued at 2 shillings a bushel and wheat at 4 shillings.) Rev. Fuller was finally ordained in 1694, and died a year later. During his ministry the membership of the church had doubled. In 1700 a larger building was erected, approximately in front of today's schoolhouse.

The First Church was also the meeting hall for all town business. The early Town Meetings were concerned with laying out roads to neighboring towns. Residents had to donate their labor and bring their own tools or pay a fine. The position of Surveyor of Highways was very important. The Committee for Bridges and Roads consisted of Constance Southworth, Lt. Morton, John Tomson, Joseph Warren, and Isaac Howland.¹ Thus we see who were the leading citizens in the building of our town.

Our forefathers believed in education in order to read the Bible and religious tracts, but for a long time our settlers had been too preoccupied to obey the General Court's recommendation that each town have a school master (no mention of a schoolhouse). Girls were trained at home to spin, sew, cook, prepare medicines, make candles, soap, etc. Boys were given the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic when possible. Starting around 1706, the Town Meeting would arrange to hire a man for one year to teach a "free school," meaning town-supported. He was paid a small salary and was expected to rotate around for room and board, staying for three months in each district while holding classes in private homes. However, even this small amount of education was available only spasmodically, and the Grand Jury repeatedly reprimanded the Town for not having a teacher for several terms.

We think the first schoolhouse was built at Muttok by Judge Oliver. Then Eddyville and the West Precinct (Lakeville) had a school. Now that classes were held in a fixed location, transportation from the outlying farms became a problem. Even though the law said that every town of fifty families must have school, attendance was not compulsory. Each school had to be self-sufficient. The older boys cut the wood and tended the fire, carried in a bucket of water from a neighbor's well,

and swept the floor.

Probably few boys in Middleberry went to college, although Harvard was within traveling distance. The minister tutored the boys in Greek and Latin until they could pass the entrance test, and age was not a factor. However, a classical education was of no use to Middleberry's farm boys, so (like their sisters), they learned the practical arts at home.

As roads made traveling possible, Middleberry became the center from which the routes branched out to Plymouth and the Cape, to New Bedford, to Wareham, to Taunton, and to Roger Williams' Rhode Island. Inns began to function about twenty miles apart as a resting place for horses and passengers. George Vaughan had received a license from the General Court in Plymouth for an "ordinary" in 1669, and Francis Coombs received a license when the town was rebuilt in 1678. Isaac Howland supported his family of eight children by running an inn (1684). Hell's Blazes (1690) had the strangest name, probably referring to the iron foundry nearby. The most unusual inn was the Hole-in-the-Wall Tavern on the road to Wareham by the Weweantic River. The cook was in hiding, thought to be one of the regicides who voted to execute King Charles I, and forced into hiding when Charles II took the throne. A hand passed out the food through a hole in the wall, and the man's face was never seen. This was another reminder that Middleberry was ruled by England. All of these "ordinaries" were private homes where a meal would be served and the horses could be fed and exchanged. Travelers who wanted to spend the night expected accommodations to be very crowded as they literally became one of the family.

The most prosperous farmers were replacing their crude cabins with comfortable homes, with glass windows, and furnished with a few good imported pieces of furniture and pewter dishes. We know what the houses looked like, — a cozy "Cape Cod" style with a central chimney, a front door with two windows on each side, and a kitchen ell, all oriented to the compass rather than to the road. We know this because some of these houses are still inhabited and others were photographed before they were demolished. The Bennett family dated their house on Plympton Street from 1687. The Ward House (on Stetson Street in Lakeville) is one of the oldest. The Barden House on Barden Hill was originally one of many built on the hill as the family's thirteen children grew up. There are many others scattered throughout the town.

Chimney fires were a very real danger. All men were expected to respond to the alarm bringing a bucket. Every family must have a ladder handy, and chimneys had to be inspected regularly.

Although every man in Middleberry must have owned a gun and ammunition, the town was slow to organize the militia. In 1681 Plymouth Colony's General Court ordered Middleberry to choose a man "to exercise their men in armes," and to check their arms and ammunition.² Two years later the town was again commanded to fulfill its military responsibility.

Please continue on Page 10

The Formation of . . .

ties. It was specifically ordered that "Middleberry choose some Officers to lead their Military Companies and Instruct them in Marshall discipline."³ The law was that every man between sixteen and sixty years of age must serve in the militia and be prepared to respond immediately to the signal of three shots. The law didn't mention this, but each man also had to supply his own food and blankets as needed.

James Soule gave two acres at the Green for the mustering field. Training Day became a holiday when everyone turned out to watch the drill and to socialize afterwards. The local Indians were no longer a threat, but England's enemies of Spain, France, and Holland were always a potential danger. And then it happened. When William and Mary took the throne, England started a series of wars with France, and the French and Indian Wars began in America. Our town was far from the fighting front, but we had men serving in every war. For King William's War (1689-1697), Middleberry was assessed for one soldier and gun, and £14 to be paid 1/3rd in money, 1/3rd in grain, and 1/3rd in beef and pork. Later we sent a man to Albany and three sailed to Quebec on a mission that failed. Tradition says that our men were also sent north to Maine with Capt. Benjamin Church. We knew Capt. Church from King Philip's War, so maybe some of our men went to Nova Scotia with him and Gen. Winslow when these men carried out the command to disperse the Acadians who had betrayed some British soldiers that sought shelter with them. Very likely some Acadians were dropped off here to begin their new life under the English flag. Certainly there was much talk about this first war whenever our people gathered for church services or stopped at a tavern for news.

This first war was followed by Queen Anne's War (1702-1713), King George's War (1744-1748) which included the famous attack on Fortress Louisburg by New Englanders including men from Middleberry, and the Fortress Louisburg by New Englanders including men from Middleberry, and the French and Indian War (1754-1763) when young George Washington saved the remains of Gen. Braddock's army at Fort Duquesne. Once again Louisburg had to be captured. "Wars and rumors of war" were frequent here in Colonial Middleborough, but finally Wolfe defeated Montcalm at Quebec, the wars with France were over, and Canada belonged to Great Britain. (England and Scotland had been united in 1707.) Except for Florida, all of North America from the Atlantic to the Mississippi River was at peace and prepared to grow in prosperity as the largest part of the British Empire. Little did anyone guess that in two years the Stamp Act would start serious trouble between London and America.

¹ Weston, *History of the Town of Middleboro, Massachusetts*. p.505.

² Weston, *History of the Town of Middleboro, Massachusetts*. p.505

³ Ibid. p.194.

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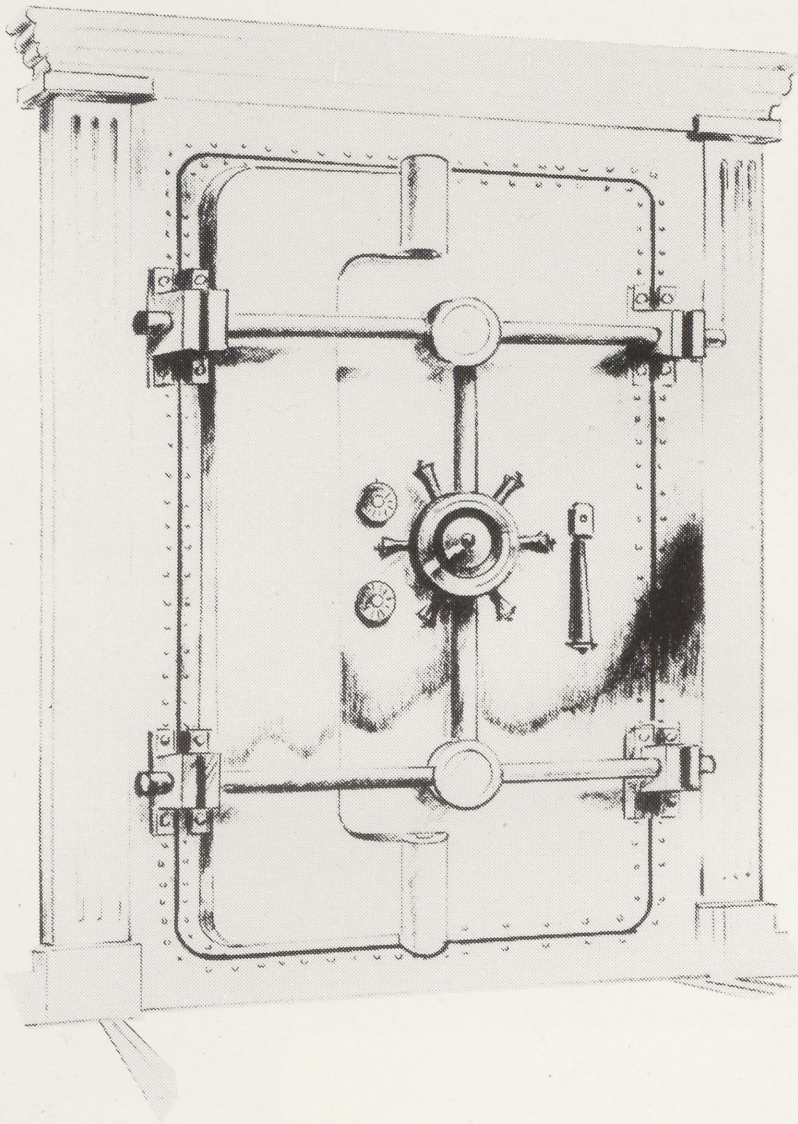
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